

We Are a Nation of Oiloholics

Instead of Ranting at Oil Companies, Pols, Let's Look in the Mirror

Colin Beavan, The Huffington Post, 7-12-10

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Question: When an alcoholic leaves a bar, gets behind the wheel and drunkenly drives into his third or fourth wreck, do you blame the bartender who served the drinks or the alcoholic who drank them? Now answer this: When a society addicted to greater and greater fossil fuel use experiences what may amount to the largest oil spill in world history -- after a growing number of other fossil fuel catastrophes -- do you blame the oil company that drilled for the oil or the society that uses it?

I mean, I get it. If you're anything like me, you're pissed as hell at BP, the company whose deep-water oil well continues to gush some 60,000 barrels of oil a day, nobody knows exactly how much, into the Gulf of Mexico -- and the infuriatingly feeble attempts to clean it up, much less plug the hole. You're probably pissed, too, at the United States Department of the Interior who gave BP (and many other oil companies, by the way) permission to drill in hazardous conditions without a reliable safety plan.

But after you dial your Senator -- as you should -- and rant about our country getting off fossil fuels and onto renewable energy, it's worth taking a good, hard look at whether the bartender, as it were, deserves all of the blame.

Because again, if you're anything like me, even though it's 90 degrees outside, you're currently sitting in a home or office where the air conditioning is cranked so high that your toes are too cold for your flip-flops. Most of that energy comes from, you guessed it, a fossil fuel called coal. Or, perhaps, as I used to, you run your car engine for four hours every week and go nowhere while you protect your curbside parking space in a city that has one of the world's most accessible and efficient transit systems. The fuel for that, of course, starts as crude oil. Or maybe your purchases, manufactured with the oomph of fossil fuels, burst out of your closets to the point that you rent a storage unit so full of crap that you're no longer sure what's in it.

We are, in other words, more than a little bit like that alcoholic who's mad at the bartender for serving him the drinks that he himself ordered. We Americans are slugging down the energy cocktails. Unless we want more and more calamities like in the Gulf, we have to own up to our energy addiction. It's step one in the 12-step road to recovery.

We in the United States drive 20 times more miles a year than the Mexicans and twice as many as the Japanese. We use 10 times more electricity per person than the Egyptians and twice as much as the Saudis. To power this energy thirst, we each, on average, consume 10 times more oil per person than the Chinese and twice as much as the Germans. We burn seven times more coal per person than the Indians and three times more than the Brits. For all the talk of China's climate emissions, each American still emits four times more greenhouse gas than each Chinese.

Meanwhile, we have to face up to the fact that the oil we so badly crave isn't exactly bubbling up out of the ground the way it used to in states like Oklahoma and Texas. There was a day when we could scoop the stuff up with a saucepan, and oil rigs were rickety old wooden affairs. Now, the goop is so scarce that oil companies must spend billions to build potentially dangerous, deep-water wells that drill a mile under our oceans. It used to

take one barrel of oil to power the harvesting of 100 barrels. Now, you have to burn an entire barrel of oil just to get 11. Simply put, worldwide, the growth in demand for oil is far outstripping growth in its dwindling supply.

This is to say nothing of coal, where we get so much of our electricity. The extraction of the black stuff from the earth is an arcane and dangerous process, and burning it pumps thousands of tons of toxins and greenhouse gases into our air.

All of which means it's getting harder and harder to safely satisfy our energy addiction. We will have to drill in deeper and deeper water and face up to worse and worse catastrophes. The BP oil spill is just the beginning, or at least just the middle. Because let's not forget that we have thousands of troops in the Middle East who probably wouldn't be there if not for oil. High gas prices in 2008, many believe, helped push the American economy into recession. And of course, our dependence on fossil fuels is causing an irreversible change in planetary climate that will bring immense human suffering.

Typically, our knee-jerk is to blame the greedy corporations and do-nothing politicians. But how much more could be accomplished if each American accepted that he or she plays a part in the problem and therefore could contribute to the solution?

A lot more. That is the line of reasoning that led me, back in late 2006, to take the moniker "No Impact Man" and to spend a year -- chronicled in a book and film -- using as little energy as possible in the middle of New York City. I found that I'd joined a movement of Americans searching for ways to live less energy-intensive lives. Since then, I've been called an environmentalist, an extremist and an activist. But actually, I'm just a former writer of history books. A typical New York media professional who couldn't take blaming the bartender anymore.

What I discovered on my journey is that there are 200,000 New Yorkers who don't even use the energy of mass transit and commute back and forth to work each day by bike -- getting their exercise in the meantime. Another half a million New Yorkers shop for food from city farmers' markets each week, saving the fossil fuels associated with the 1,500 mile journey industrially-produced food typically makes from farm to plate while getting food that's actually good for them.

Some cut their flying by video-conferencing or taking one two-week vacation instead of two one-week vacations. Others use fans instead of air-conditioners or drink tap water instead of bottled. Some have committed to buying only secondhand. Others have given up beef. The list, of course, goes on and on.

What these people who take responsibility for energy consumption have discovered is that they get less-expensive, healthier lives in return. And they believe the benefits of their own lifestyle changes are a mini-version of what could happen to our culture. A country that relies less on fossil fuels and more on domestically-produced renewable energy keeps its money and its soldiers at home. It gets a renewable technology industry that provides jobs. It gets air without chemicals burned into it. And it gets beaches and oceans that aren't filled with toxic sludge.

I know what you're thinking because I've thought it, too. I'd like to change my life and help, but so far, I haven't really been affected. I feel sorry for the Gulf Coast folks, but that's not me.

It will be. Right now, to satisfy our energy addictions, politicians and corporations are considering proposals for as many as 50,000 natural gas wells right in the middle of New York City's watershed. In a process, called "fracking," they propose to send a high-pressure mixture of water and extremely toxic chemicals into the ground to cause mini-earthquakes to release the hard-to-get natural gas.

Environmentalists have held them off thus far, but what happens when our energy yearnings makes them yield? What happens if fracking's toxic mixtures end up in the aquifer that supplies 8 million New Yorkers with drinking water?

Do we want to get what we've always got? Are we willing to accept the consequences of our energy addictions? Or do we want something better? More to the point, are you personally willing to accept some of the blame -- alongside the bartender -- and help us break our energy habit? If so, I'll see you in the bike lane.